POLLUTION IS ERASING EARTH'S PROTECTION

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Body

I'M SURE you've heard people talk about the destruction of the ozone layer. It's an incredibly important topic; some scientists believe it's the most critical environmental issue we face. Yet not everyone's clear on the concept. Is ozone depletion the same thing as the greenhouse effect? Is there anything we can do about it? What does it mean if the ozone layer gets thinner? In fact, what IS the ozone layer? Let's start with the basics: The ozone layer is a shield of ozone gas located some 6 to 30 miles above the ground. It protects us by filtering out the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays. Without it, life could not exist on our planet. Now the ozone layer is being threatened by man-made gases called chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), which are used as coolants in refrigerators and air conditioners, in polystyrene foam, in cleaning fluids and sometimes in aerosols. When CFCs are released into the atmosphere, they rise slowly; after eight or 10 years, they finally reach the ozone layer. There the sun's ultraviolet rays shatter CFCs, freeing chlorine atoms. And that's when the trouble begins. The chlorine atoms behave like little Pac Men, "eating" ozone molecules. Believe it or not, a single chlorine atom can eat 100,000 ozone molecules. Unfortunately, we've released so many CFCs that the ozone layer is now deteriorating. In 1984, an ozone hole roughly the size of the continental United States was discovered over Antarctica. Now the ozone layer over North America is getting thinner.

What happens if we lose the protective layer of ozone? No one knows all the ramifications, but we're sure that incidences of skin cancer are increasing as a result of ozone depletion. And Worldwatch Institute says: "As more ultraviolet radiation penetrates the atmosphere, it will worsen these health effects, reduce crop yields and fish population. It will affect the well-being of every person on the planet." Is there anything we can do about it? Absolutely. This is one area where it's quite clear that just as we created the problem, we can solve it. The solution begins with education. We have to learn how to cut down on our use of CFCs - and how to keep them out of the atmosphere when we do use them. For example: According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, car air conditioners are responsible for 16 percent of the ozone depletion. The NRDC suggests: "When your air conditioner leaks, don't just refill it; get it fixed properly. If you don't fix the leak, the CFCs you put in today just go into the air next week." The next time you get your car air conditioner serviced, take it to a garage with a "vampire" - a machine that stores CFCs safely until they can be recycled. The same thing applies to old refrigerators and home air conditioners that are about to be scrapped. Check the labels of your aerosols. An estimated 10 percent of aerosols still use CFCs as a propellant, particularly cleaning sprays for photographs, VCRs and sewing machines. Next week, I'll tell you more about what you can do to help fight ozone depletion. . Write to John Javna in care of EarthWorks, P.O. Box 419149, Kansas City, Mo. 64141. Because of the volume of mail, Javna is unable to reply personally but will address issues of general interest in the column. Now available: "50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth," by the EarthWorks Group. To order, please send $6.95 plus $1.50 postage and handling to "50 Simple Things," Andrews & McMeel, P.O. Box 419150, Kansas City, Mo. 64141.

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